

The Life and Influence of Charles Pinckney

Charles Pinckney was born into a prominent Charleston, South Carolina family on October 26, 1757. His father, a wealthy planter and attorney, was also commanding officer of the local militia, a member of the General Assembly, and, in 1775, president of the South Carolina Provincial Congress. The Pinckneys were part of Charleston's social elite.

Young Charles received his basic schooling from Dr. David Oliphant, a noted South Carolina scholar who emphasized history, the classics, political science, and languages. In 1773, when the growing unrest between Great Britain and the colonies disrupted Charles's plans to attend school in England, he stayed home and studied law with his father.

Charles's career of public service started in 1779 at age 21 in the midst of the American Revolution. After joining the South Carolina Bar, he represented Christ Church Parish in the General Assembly and, as a lieutenant in his father's militia regiment, took part in the abortive Franco-American attempt to retake Savannah, Georgia from the British.

When the British captured Charleston in the spring of 1780, Charles and his father were arrested and imprisoned along with other American officers. Charles remained confined until June 1781. His father, however, was freed after swearing allegiance to the British Crown, an action that saved the Pinckney estate, including Snee Farm, from confiscation.

In 1784, after serving briefly in the General Assembly, Charles Pinckney was selected as a delegate to Congress, then meeting in Trenton, New Jersey. In May 1787, he, his cousin Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, Pierce Butler, and John Rutledge represented South Carolina at the Constitutional Convention meeting in Philadelphia to address the weaknesses in the Articles of Confederation. Charles Pinckney took an active part in the debate and subsequently labored diligently for South Carolina to ratify the new Constitution, which it did on May 23, 1788.

In April 1788, Pinckney married Mary Eleanor Laurens, with whom he would have three children. Over the next 10 years, he held a variety of political offices, including president of the South Carolina State Constitutional Convention (1790), South Carolina governor (1789-91, 1791-92, and 1796-98), and U.S. Senator (1798-1801).

During the nation's formative years, the Pinckneys were supporters of the Federalist Party. By 1795, however, Charles had come to view the Federalists as the party of the rich and well-born, and he joined Thomas Jefferson's newly formed Democratic-Republican Party, championing the interests of rural Americans over those of the tidewater aristocracy. During the Presidential campaign of 1800, Pinckney was Jefferson's South Carolina campaign manager and helped him win the election. As a reward, Jefferson appointed him Ambassador to Spain, a post he held from 1801-1805. During that time, he helped to facilitate the transfer of Louisiana from France and make a valiant but unsuccessful effort to get Spain to cede Florida to the United States.

Pinckney returned to South Carolina in January 1806 and served briefly in the General Assembly before being elected to his fourth and final term as governor (1806-08). In 1818, after a final term in the legislature and a brief retirement from active political life, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, from which he retired in 1821. He spent his final years writing of his travels and political life. He died on October 29, 1824, at age 67, after more than 40 years of service to community, state, and nation. His is buried at St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Charleston.

Charles Pinckney's life is significant in American history because of his contributions to the framing of the U.S. Constitution. In 1783, Pinckney published three pamphlets that argued for amending the Articles of Confederation. His efforts in the Continental Congress from 1784 through 1787 gave him a national reputation and led to his subsequent work during the Constitutional Convention of 1787.

Pinckney's speech to the constitutional Convention on June 25, 1787, was significant for its American tone. Frances Thorpe (1901) in his *Constitutional History of the United States* writes how "Pinckney brought the mind of the Convention back to America and emphasized the unique situation of its people. He would not break with the past, yet would found a government adapted to the needs and wants of a new country and a new Nation."

Pinckney's speech at the Convention, taken from Farrand (1937) in *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, includes the following remarks about his fellow citizens:

Among them there are fewer distinctions of fortune & less of rank, than among the inhabitants of any other nation. Every freeman has a right to the same protection & security... Our true situation appears to me to be this – a new extensive Country containing within itself the materials for forming a Government capable of extending to its citizens all the blessings of civil and religious liberty – capable of making them happy at home. This is the great end of Republican Establishments... Our government must be made suitable to the people, and we are perhaps the only people in the world who ever had sense enough to appoint delegates to establish a general government.

Madison's notes from the Convention indicate that Pinckney presented his "draught of a federal Government which he had prepared to be agreed upon between the free and independent states of America. Mr. P[']s plan ordered that the same be referred to the Committee of the whole appointed to consider the state of the American Union."

Constitutional historians state that of the four plans presented to the convention, only those of Alexander Hamilton and Charles Pinckney were formulated before the Convention met. Thomas Johnson (1966) in *The Oxford Companion to American History* attributes the following significant provisions to Pinckney:

Article I, Section 2, clause 5: The House of Representatives shall chuse [sic] their Speaker and other Officers; and shall have the sole Power of Impeachment.

Article I, Section 8, clause 3: The Congress shall have power,... To regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes.

Article I, section 8, clause 4: The Congress shall have power,... To establish an uniform Rule of Naturalization, and uniform Laws on the subject of Bankruptcies throughout the United States.

Article IV, Section 2: The citizens of each State shall be entitled to all Privileges and Immunities of Citizens in the several States.

Article VI, section 3: ...no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the Untied States.